Land, cloth, body and culture

As a *weaver* by trade and training, a *seamstress* and *laundress* by design, an *artist* in text and textiles by sensibility, I will spin a yarn, tangle a web, and construct a text(ile) of the inter-weave of narrative, materiality and identity that I define as my intellectual and practice obsessions. My visual, performance and textual work explores 'the places in-between' in Irish and Northern Irish gender and identity, in intersex and 'anatomical drag', and in fabrics of death and desire. In this extended essay, each work I will show and each word I will speak is chosen from over twenty-five years of a creative and professional practice concerned with making sense of the complexities, conundrums, challenges and contradictions of *my* land, *my* cloth, *my* body and *my* culture.

Ourselves Alone 1990, mixed media including hand made paper, sisal, bitumen and the complete Northern Ireland telephone directory of 1990 just visible under the skin, 130 x 160 x 20 cms. **Private collection in Ireland.**

Section One
Irish and Northern Irish gender and identity: land, cloth, body and culture

I am Irish, Northern Irish, and from the North of Ireland. Each fragment of my national multi-identity is contested, fragmented, marginal and contingent. Yet the conservative canon of Irish, Northern Irish and North of Ireland textile culture suggests a confident and romantic discourse, valorizing the feminine and domestic industry of, for example, white-work stitches and sprigged embroidery, drawn thread and patchwork quilting, crochet and lace-making, flax threading and linen weaving. Of the twin traditions – Irish Republican and Ulster Unionism – in my land, Unionist Loyalism's dominant textile signifiers are the banners, flags and sashes that assert the history, religion and ideology of that fraternity in a vibrant and unambiguous material culture that is designed to maintain an absolutist Protestant legacy of loyalty to the British Crown.

Variously decorative, provocative, offensive and beautiful, these objects function as 'apotropaic or talismanic' textiles, apparently protecting Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom from the perceived malevolence of Catholic Republicanism and Irish Nationalism. These too have their own artifact-rich, symbolically encoded and embodied textile traditions, witnessed in other flags and embroidered emblems, and in particular woven and knitted concepts of national dress. Seamus Heaney articulated the power difference between those twin traditions, however, configuring Ireland as violated virgin and colonized victim of a coercive *Act of Union*, back turned on a "still imperially/Male" England, and on the authoritative culture and self-affirming politics of Northern Irish Loyalism[1].

My inadvertent challenge to that identity happened in 1987. I attempted to cross a road between banners and bands at a Belfast Loyalist parade. Wrestled to the ground by four men, I was thrown back to the side of the road from whence I came to wait for the end of the parade. The authority of those banners, and right of way of their bearers, was not up for crossing. The hot pizza I was carrying burst its bag, and impregnated itself deep into the weave of my dress, impressing its fierce fat-heat onto my stomach, my skin branded with an unmistakable message – that of the inalienable, sacred and unapologetic right of way of Loyalism's dominant cultural force. My masochism was silence, my body-memory was abjection, and my senses heightened by the clarity of my awareness that everyday, somatic *and* ceremonial textiles – my dress, my body and those banners – construct and negotiate the 'cultural baggage' we carry bundled and strapped to our souls[2].

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[1] Heaney, S. *North*. Faber and Faber, 1975.

[2] Layne, B. *Migrant Textiles: Burdens, Bundles and Baggage* In: Jeffries, J. (ed.) *Reinventing Textiles (Vol.2)* Winchester: Telos Art Publishing, 2001, 77-90 (77).

When you are young, significant moments in cultural history align with your own important timeline, place names resonate with where you live, and events echo with what is happening in your life. That is youth's self-protecting narcissism. In hindsight and from a distance, it is possible to see how inured my generation was to what was termed 'an acceptable level of violence' in Northern Ireland, and how somehow normal it all felt. Although the product of a (failed and culturally-tense) 'mixed marriage', my nurture and influence was of Protestant traditionalism, control and diligence. I was taught early the stigma of free expression and the exercise of self-denial and self-repression, the essence of sober, tight-lipped and entrenched West Belfast Presbyterianism: 'whatever you say, say nothing'.

Woman Mouth Stapled Shut (detail)
1988-90, mixed natural media, bitumen, metal staple, sculpture 150 x150 90 cm.
Private collection in Ireland.

Men, women, children, the unborn; Catholics and Protestants; Republican Nationalists and Loyalist Unionists; those in military, police and paramilitary uniforms, those in civilian clothes, in Northern Ireland and over here on the 'mainland' seemed to be 'legitimate targets' for somebody. Escalation of violence, then the slow hungered-for turn towards partial-then-actual ceasefires; the beginning of arms decommissioning; stop-start cessation of violence; Northern Ireland's fragile peace holds on by threads only today, and sorrow and suffering remains.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I maintained a visual art practice of large-scale constructed forms, drawing and reliefs emergent from a woven textile practice related to the land I was brought up in, the bog landscape of County Derry. Not wanting to look *directly* at the murder,

martyrdom and misery of the so-called Troubles around me, as some – predominantly male – artists in the North seemed able to, I created works that referenced older bodies, those Bronze and Iron Age bog cadavers – most likely sacrificed or executed – of Irish Cashel Man, English Lindow Man, German Windeby Woman, Danish Tollund Man and the rest, ritualized and preserved in the acidic, anaerobic, cold and wet peat lands of Ireland and Northern Europe. Brian McAvera has referred to Northern Irish artists' tendency then "towards the oblique and layered response", and these ancient people resonated for me with the collective victims of the Northern Irish conflict without directly representing or naming them[3]. Of this practice, Sean Cubitt noted my "superb draughtmanship [and] remarkable care for…materials and their resonance [in] complex networks of irony and displacement", while Gemma Tipton saw the "inherent tension in the images of female sexuality and devotion because of the tragic, futile violence behind bloody human sacrifice in the name of a land and a civilization that is not always civilized"[4]. The significance of bog, as an otherworldly place between solid and liquid, history and contemporary, reality and mythology, echoed the place of my birth, neither wholly Irish nor wholly British, but liminal and unknowable.

Face Down (and detail) 1990, mixed natural media and bitumen, 180 x 230 cm. **Private collection in Ireland.**

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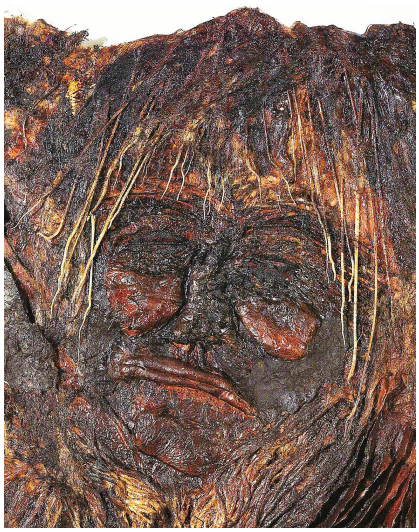
[3] McAvera, B. *Parable Island: some aspects of recent Irish art* Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1990, 21.

[4] Cubitt, S. *Strongholds and Parable Island* Artscribe, Summer 1991.

Tipton, G. *Catherine Harper at Project Arts Centre, Dublin* CIRCA Spring 1993.


Post Coitum Omne Animale Triste Est 1990, mixed natural media and bitumen, 75 x 100 cm.

Guilt (detail), 1990, mixed natural media and bitumen, 180 x 230 cm.

That Treacherous Lecherous One (detail) 1990, fibres, bone, bitumen, other mixed media, 290 x 95 x 80 cm.

Each in private collection, Ireland.



That Treacherous Lecherous One (detail) 1990, pencil on card, 75 x 100 cm.

Post Coitum Omne Animale Triste Est 1990, pencil on card, 75 x 100 cm.

Crow 1990, pencil on card, 75 x 100 cm.

Each in private collections, Ireland.

My first solo exhibition of the 'bog bodies' works was at Derry's Orchard Gallery in 1991[5], where I launched an exhibiting practice that saw these and similar works included in, for example, the Arts Council of Ireland/Northern Ireland's *Poetic Land/Political Territory* exhibition to eight Scottish, Welsh and English galleries including London's Barbican (1995-96), the *Parable Island* show at Liverpool's Bluecoat Gallery (1991), and Northern Irish Arts Council's *Human/Nature* touring exhibition to five galleries in eastern Canada (1995-96).

Bog Textile (details) 1989-90, paper, pigment, gold fabric and threads, natural materials including wool, horsehair and sisal. **Collection of University of Ulster, Derry.**

In the *Human/Nature* publication (1995), I wrote:

Bogland, with its folds, faults, intrusions, rifts and crevices of sod and clod, hidden places, wombs and layers, is certainly female, producing life, growth and eventually decay in the continuous cycle of life and death. The image of people being swallowed into the black bog ditches and being held there preserved is a vivid one. Bog… symbolizes the raw potency of our sexual energy, one of the most basic motivating factors for our actions. Procreative and vital, it is also treacherous and consuming… Bog is built by and rejuvenated by death and decay, pushing new life to the surface while simultaneously drawing in and digesting the old. The Earth mother/goddess nourishes us and we depend on her fertility, while she in turn is nourished by our eventual and inevitable demise[6].

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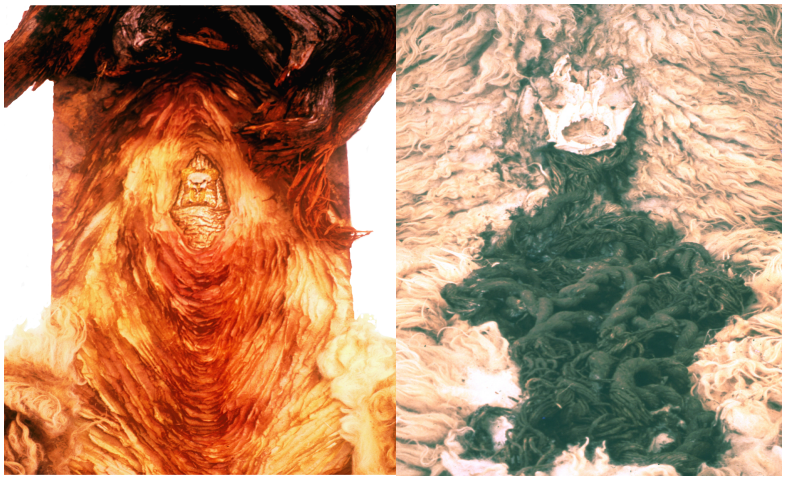
[5] *A Beginning* travelled from Orchard Gallery, Derry to eleven Irish and UK venues throughout 1991-93, including Project Arts Centre, Dublin and Orpheus Gallery, Belfast.

[6] *Human/Nature: Seven Artists from Ireland* Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador, and touring in Canada, 1996, 18.

Complex readings of land, culture and gender in my work were underway: Liam Kelly, in *Thinking Long* (1996), wrote of my practice as "cultural mapping of the psychic landscape", with land as "a vehicle to explore more personal emotions and associations", and in *Conceptua Immaculata* (1990), Kelly recognized "a message to man as wayward patriarch, with a gold nugget phallic symbol placed appropriately"[7].



Conceptua Immaculata (upper and lower details) 1990, mixed natural media including unwashed sheep's fleece, bone, dung, sisal, handmade paper, bog wood, gold embroidery, installation sizes varied, circa 300 x 300 x 300 cm. **Collection of the artist.**

That cultural mapping also took the form of work made out on the bog landscape, that pre-empted later performance work in a very different register. In the Sculptors' Society of Ireland *Bogland Symposium* (1990), I created a ritual to *Nerthus*, Northern European tribe goddess of fertility documented by Tacitus, first century AD Roman historian, in his *Germania*[8]. Tacitus noted too the ritual drowning in bogs of slaves used to wash the sacred cart and cloth used for veneration of this deity, and Brian McAvera noted my own words in the *Parable Island* (1990) catalogue:

…the emotions of facing ancestors, bodies that, had I lived in Iron Age time, might have been father, sister, lover, child or even myself. I might even have been their killer[9].

Both Tacitus and the respected modern archaeologist P.V. Glob recorded that many of the Bronze and Iron Age bog bodies were accompanied by votive/symbolic objects or execution devices, were killed using multiple means (stabbed, bludgeoned, strangled, drowned, beheaded), were pinned down with forked sticks, were seemingly arranged in foetal formation or with entrails drawn through incisions in their skin, appearing to have been

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[7] Kelly, L. *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in the North of Ireland* Kinsale: Gandon, 1996, 19, 46, 55.

[8] *Bogland Symposium*, 1990, Sculptors' Society of Ireland, Wicklow Mountains, Ireland, and subsequently represented at Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast and Irish Life Exhibition Centre, Dublin, 1990-91.

[9] McAvera, B. ibid. 27.

ritualistically tortured before death or maimed afterwards. I enacted my despair at the trauma endemic in Northern Ireland at that time via my work on these ancient ancestors. Glob's belief that these unfortunates were "offerings to the gods of fertility and good fortune"[10] resonated with my articulations of my land as womb and tomb, devouring and voracious, *vagina dentata* and *Máthair Eire*, spawning and interring, nurturing and incarcerating, a goddess of martyrdom and of blood sacrifice, emblematic of sacred repression and the pious humility of acceptance.

Wicklow Nerthus
1990, ritual performance, Wicklow mountain bog, Ireland

A Strong Woman made weak 1990, hand made paper, bog vegetation, bitumen, bog wood, 45 x 120 x 20 cms.
My heart below my breast 1990, hand made paper, bone, bitumen 45 x 120 x 20 cms.
Both in private collections in Ireland.

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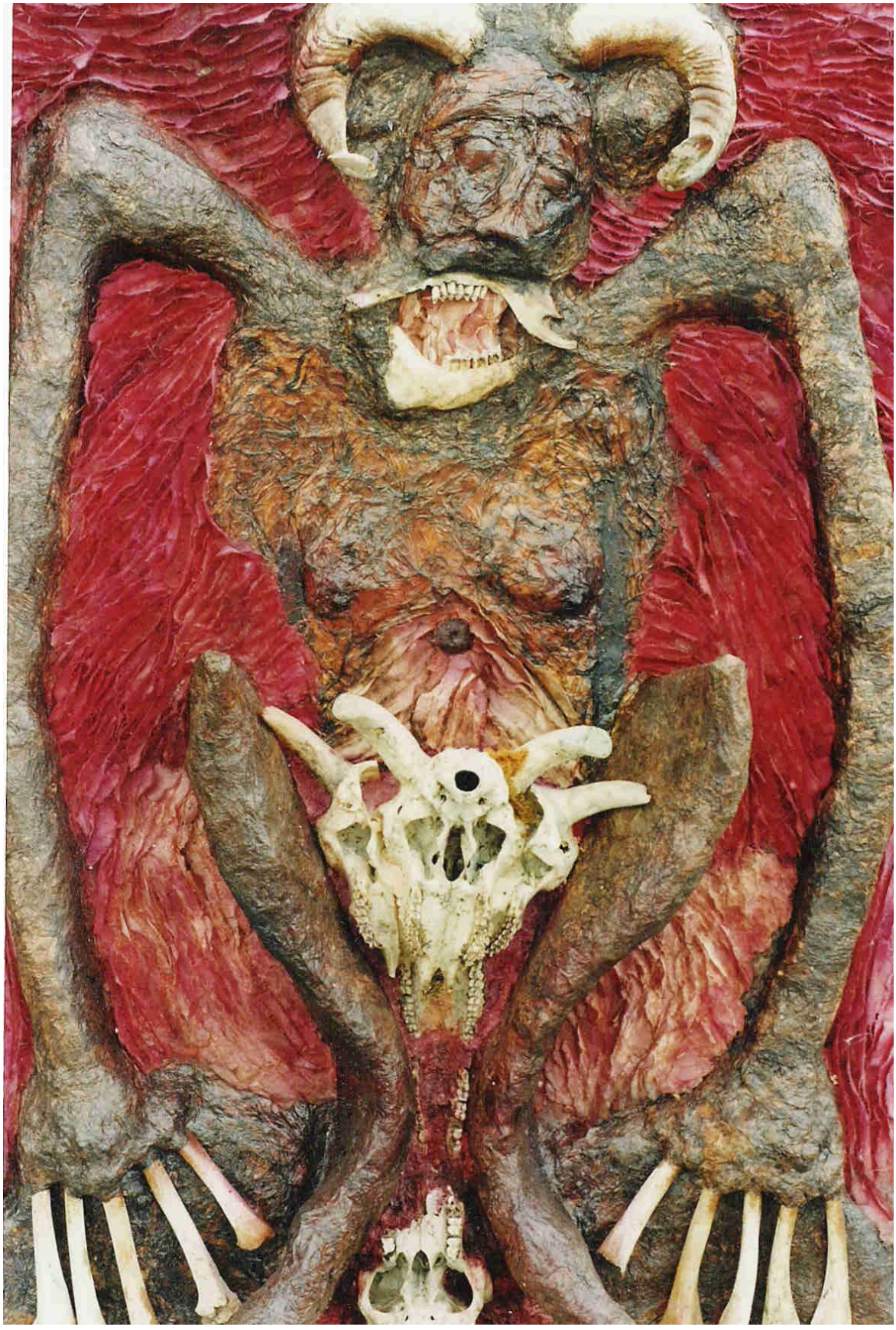
[10] Glob, P.V. *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969, 136.



Sheela on her knees 1990, mixed natural media, bitumen and hand made papers, 90 x 150 cm.

Collection of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Ireland

Bonnie Leyton responded to the visceral and sexual aspect of, for example, *That Treacherous Lecherous One* (1990) and *The Come On Smile* (1990), writing that "Harper's strong flesh seems blood-gorged as she speaks of passages and transformations"[11], while Colin Darke, in the catalogue for Japan's Itami Museum exhibition of Irish art (1995), saw in my work "a conflict between pleasure and pain, desire and disappointment", and detected allusion to sexuality and a less abstract anger that would emerge over time[12].

Christina Bridgwater's *Poetic Land/Political Territory* essay refers to my "powerful and extraordinary sculptures from the living materials of the bogland"[13], while Liam Kelly again marked the "dangerous territories…trapped nerves" and complex articulations of woman as protector and provider, while also sacrificial victim, wayward, predatory and sexual manipulator, mobilizing her power as a fatal attraction[14].

That Treacherous Lecherous One 1990 fibres, bone, bitumen, other mixed media, 290 x 95 x 80 cm.
Private collection, Ireland

[11] Leyton, B. *Human/Nature:* ibid. 12.

[12] Darke, C. *12 Young Artists from Ireland* Itami City Museum of Art, Japan, 1995, 41.

[13] Bridgwater, C. *Poetic Land – Political Territory* Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, 1995, then touring in Britain, 1995-96.

[14] Kelly, L. *The Art of Interrogations* In: *Poetic Land – Political Territory* ibid. 1995.

As the Northern Troubles played out the relentless repetition of devastation, suffering, atrocity and execution, the social context of the island of Ireland was under pressure too. For Northern Irish women, whose rights were obscured by the dominant discourse of the sectarian struggle in the North, and who sought an 'alternative Ireland' no longer repressed by the conservative morality of Church(es) and State, the appointment of Ireland's first female President in 1990, the radical feminist Mary Robinson was an extraordinary and transformational moment. A new social politics had begun to rumble to the surface in Ireland in the 1980s, questioning Irish constitutional and governmental bans on divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality, and impacting morality and sexuality debate north of Ireland's border.

In 1982, when I was seventeen, Northern Ireland decriminalized homosexuality, with the Republic of Ireland following suit in 1993, when I was twenty-eight[15]. In the same year, 1993, the Irish Republic's continued restrictions on contraceptive information and sale were finally and fully abolished, and, in 1995, divorce in Ireland was legalized by the state, if not accepted by the Church. The Ireland of the 1980s and early 1990s was also deeply affected by growing revelation of the extensive and systemic sexual, emotional and physical abuse of thousands of children by clergy, and in Church-run industrial schools, orphanages, and the infamous Magdalene laundries[16].

Many of these institutions were established to house in the main 'illegitimate' children, their unmarried mothers, or 'promiscuous and precocious' girls, some themselves the victims of rape and/or incest. From the mid 18th century right up to when the last Irish Magdalene laundry was closed in Dublin in 1996, thousands of women and girls lived, worked unpaid, and 'disappeared' in these institutions, washing stains from the cloths of ecclesiastical, governmental, civic and commercial bodies throughout Ireland[17]. Stains on cloth and clothes are powerful symbols that I will return to later in this text.

The prevailing culture of conservative sexual morality, both in Catholic Ireland, and in the Protestantism more prevalent north of the Irish border, was the backdrop to my experience at University of Ulster, where – to reference an earlier point – whatever we said, we said nothing.

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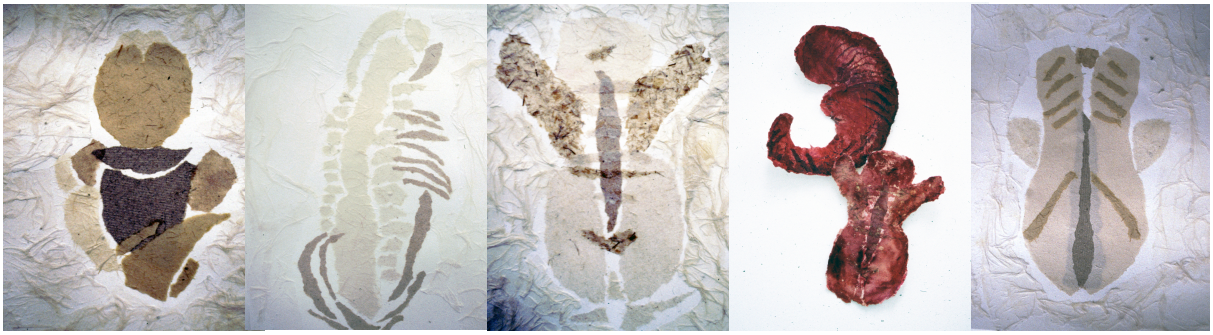
[15] Homosexuality was decriminalized in Britain in 1967.

[16] It is important to note here that while Ireland – as a whole – is predominantly Catholic, the culture north and south has been repressive across the religious range, as witnessed by the terrible regimes of the Protestant Bethany Women and Children's Homes.

[17] See, for example, Cooper, R. *The forgotten women of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries* The Telegraph 4 February 2013.

In 1984, my first winter at university, *The Irish Times* covered the post-partum death of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl called Ann Lovett and her newborn son beside a Virgin Mary grotto in the Irish midlands. I read that her community, clergy and family purported to have no knowledge of her pregnancy, and that she haemorraged alone, her infant dying beside her in the cold, having left school that afternoon in the early stages of labour. Cultural silence in my environment was broken by other voices beginning to whisper, and even to begin to speak[18].

In the same year, the 'Kerry Babies' scandal brought infanticide, unmarried maternity, secrecy and infidelity, and then women's rights and reproductive autonomy, further into the media spotlight in Ireland. Derry film-maker Margo Harkin's *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1990), set in Derry in 1984, is an example of how Irish feminist creatives were contributing to a developing, painful, national conversation about sexuality and women's rights in Ireland: *Hush-a-Bye Baby* "was directly influenced by the moral panic which beset Ireland during the first abortion referendum in Ireland in 1983"[19]. The prevailing message for young women like myself in Ireland was that female sexuality was highly dangerous, female desire or bodily pleasure was taboo, the female body was potentially incendiary, volatile and inadvertently provocative, and sexual transgression of narrow normative codes of behavior enshrined in constitution, legislation and convention was the way to self-inflicted social and moral damnation.



OSOV sketches 1995-96, hand made paper, each 20 x 30 cm, created while Artist in Residence at Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. **Collection of the artist.**

[18] I spent the summers of 1983 and 1984 at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, England, where I came into contact with women, several from Ireland, who significantly influenced my thinking on feminism, women's reproductive rights, sexuality and autonomy, but it was some years before I could speak openly about such issues, such was the shame, stigma and societal disapproval attached to these issues in my personal culture.

[19] Besom Productions http://www.besomproductions.co.uk/hush.html (accessed January 2016).

In December 1991, one of the most controversial social, legal and moral battles in Ireland began when a fourteen-year-old Irish girl, sexually abused by her neighbour over two years, became pregnant. With termination illegal in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the girl and her family sought this in London, but were forbidden to leave Ireland by the 1983 Constitutional Amendment, which placed foetal right to life as equal to that of the mother, regardless of circumstances (in fact, they had already travelled, but immediately returned by order of the Attorney General). The Supreme Court overturned the travel ban on the grounds that the child's suicide risk was deemed very highhigh, and should this happen then both mother and foetus would be lost. The girl miscarried in England before her termination, and a subsequent referendum in 1992 clarified the right to travel and to information on UK termination, but action was not taken to clarify how determination of risk to mother's and foetus' life would be adopted in law[20]. As Savita Halappanavar's death in Galway in 2012 from septic shock during a prolonged but unsalvagable miscarriage suggests, practical decisions over when a maternal life is at serious risk continues to be difficult and contentious in Ireland, and from all perspectives in the continued debate on this issue.

In relation to all this, Catherine Nash acknowledged that my practice has grappled with

> …the immobilising and vulnerable nature of motherhood…expressing feminine solidarity and feminist spirituality and resilience…a deep vein of guilt running through Irish society for women…dichotomised versions of femininity, as nurturing and treacherous…
> For Harper the individual is both social and biological, cultural and natural, while her art in part works against these dualisms. The bog landscape for her does not provide an over-arching metaphor for national identity but a way of working through the pain and pleasures of human relationships in a local context informed by the specific iconographical and social positions of women in Ireland. Her artworks are not emblematic of a deep, whole national or individual identity once uncovered, but composite, hybrid, and layered[21].

The Big Red (1994) was a significant work for my practice, commissioned originally by Galway Arts Centre for a four-person exhibition, it was shown in Dublin and Belfast, before being purchased by Gilbert Ash Ltd. and gifted to Belfast City Council for installation in the newly opened Waterfront Hall, Belfast, where it continues to hang. Aidan Dunne's review in *The Sunday Tribune* captured the essence of this work, which

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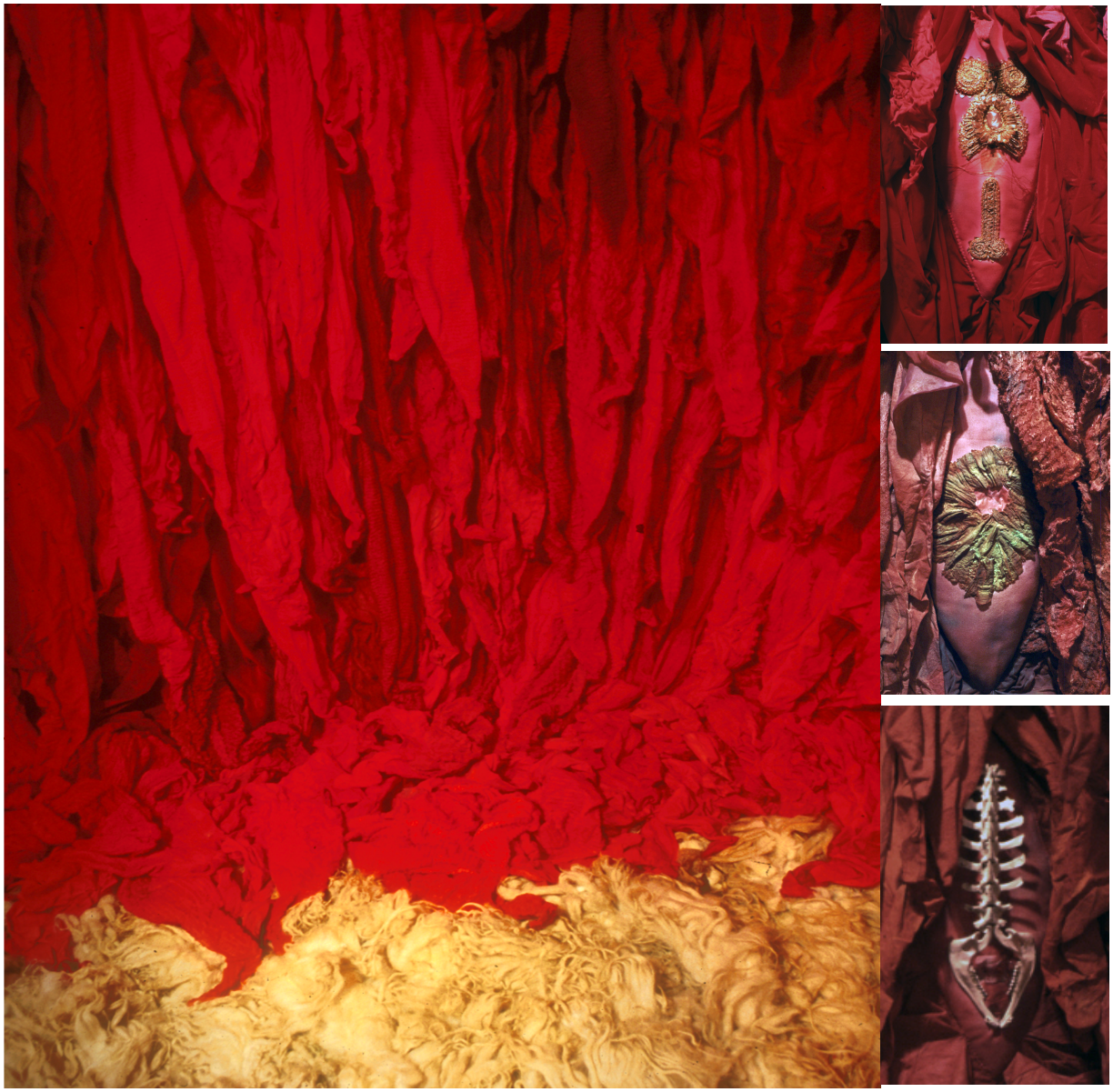
[20] Available statistics suggest over twelve Irish or Northern Irish women travel to Britain per day for termination of pregnancy http://www.thejournal.ie/twenty-years-on-a-timeline-of-the-x-case-347359-Feb2012/.

[21] Nash, C. *Landscape, Body and Nation: Cultural Geographies of Irish Identities* University of Nottingham PhD thesis, 1995, 240-41.

addressed parental (paternal) absence in Ireland, most notably my own biological father's abandonment:

…a huge, livid wall of twining, twisting red fabrics, so all-enveloping that it short-circuits any considered response…The Big Red shrouds an entire wall with masses of ragged, falling fabric strands of different textures and densities, but all dyed red. The effect is of a sanguinary waterfall which bleeds into a thick carpet of fleece that lines the floor and fills the room with a warm, heady animal odour…a formidable piece…[22]



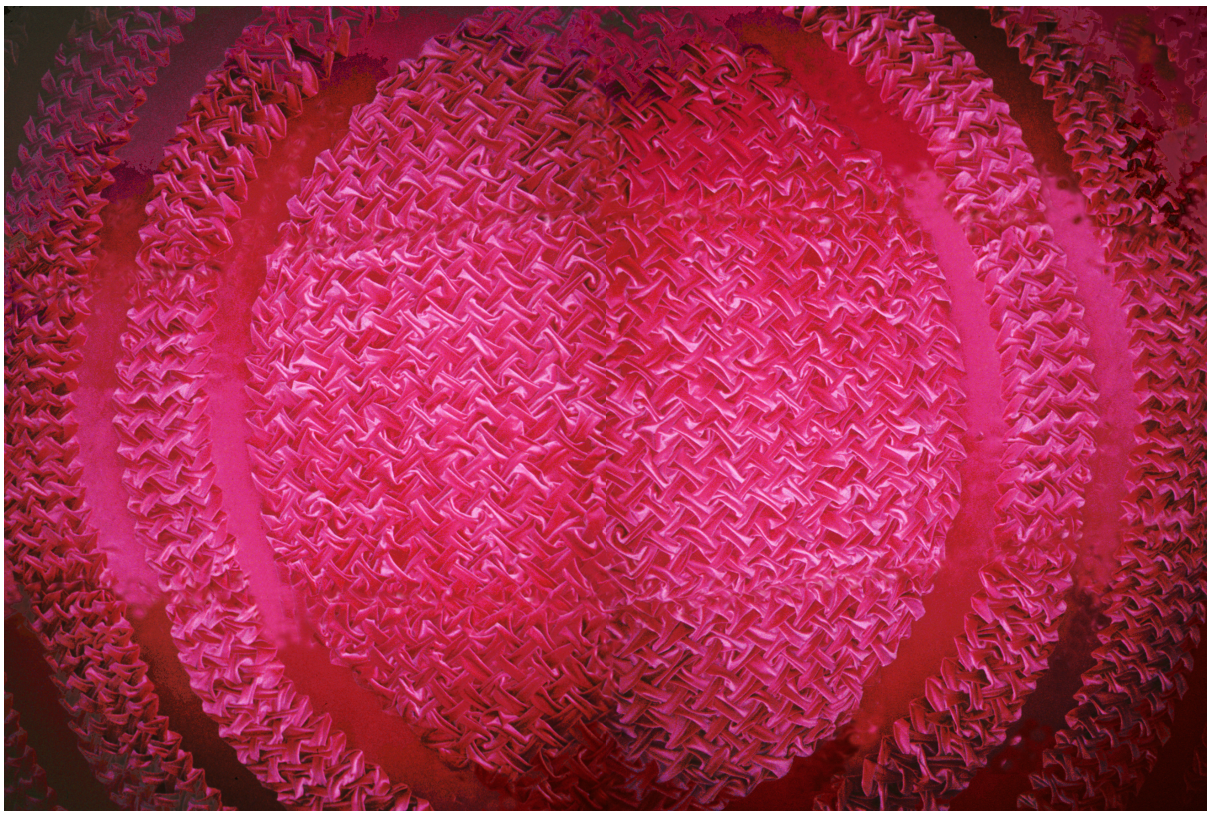
The Big Red (detail), and three Small Red supplementary works 1994, dyed red bedding, unwashed sheep's fleece, bone, blood and gold embroidery. **Collection of Belfast City Council.**

[22] Dunne, A. *Private pain coloured red* The Sunday Tribune 11 September 1994.

Ireland mythologises and celebrates maternity *in extremis*. Mother Ireland enshrines the notion of land as woman, and therefore Irish nationhood is heavily associated and constitutionally enscribed by an essentialist idea of female destiny as motherhood. Much less discussed, however, is the problematic concept of Irish manhood – and Irish fatherhood – in a castrated, colonised and infantilised culture that fails to chastise masculine irresponsibility…

An Arts Council (NI) commission for the Women's Centre, Beibhinn House, Derry, *Heart* (2001) allowed me to address these and similar ideas related to female and maternal empowerment and enablement. Luscious pink velvet was ruched to create a Canadian smocked, hand-stitched and fitted ceiling work, patterned with folds and soft pleats radiating from the centre to the edges in concentric circles, based on patterns carved on ancient Irish stones. Echoing connections between the head and the heart, and connecting conceptually with the Los Angeles Woman House project of 1972, this was a celebration work for women's culture. Maoliosa Boyle described *Heart* as:

…transformative/magical…with as many referents as dreams allow…for love, comfort, pleasure, sexual desire…sumptuous, gorgeous, decorative and sensually honouring to the women encountering it…[23]



Heart 2001, ruched velvet ceiling in reflection room, 8000 x 4000 cm.

Collection of The Women's Centre, Derry

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[23] Sheehan, D. *Conversation with Catherine Harper, Maoliosa Boyle, Margaret Logue* CIRCA 95, 2001, 38-41

Public arts practice in the 1990s provided me with opportunity to create several large scale commissioned works, Lottery-funded, for Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital and Mater Hospital NHS Trusts. Both institutions had treated numerous victims of Northern Ireland's sectarian violence.

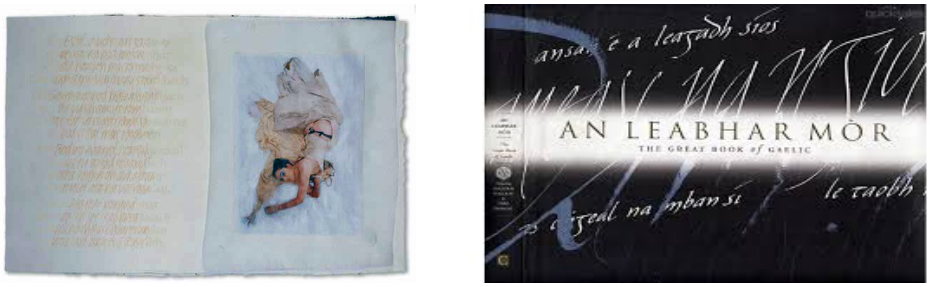
The Healing Bell (with interior detail), 2001, hand made paper and fabric, 1000 x 4000 x 4000 cm.
Collection of the Royal Victoria Hospital NHS Trust, Belfast (Lottery-funded)

For the Royal Victoria, I focused on creating a fourteen metre high, suspended three-dimensional form for the atrium through which most visitors, staff and patient admissions passed. Using labyrinthine arterial motifs worked in velvet on hand made paper, in deep royal blue with cobalt, lapis and ultramarine tones, the outer surface shrouded a glowing golden leafed interior, revealed to those who passed underneath the form as they entered the various parts of the hospital. The ascendant energy of this inner void of *The Healing Bell* linked hospital conventions of bodily healing with deep desire for local social-political healing in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland.

As Artist-in-Residence at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin for twelve months between 1995 and 1996, however, I took opportunity to re-evaluate – and question – my practice and personal direction. Ireland's intensity was exhausting and I moved to London in 1996, just missing the 'outbreak' of the current peace process in the North…

Section Two
Intersex and 'anatomical drag': land, cloth, body and culture

I moved to London in 1996, tentatively establishing an experimental practice via an MA in Textiles at Goldsmith College, University of London, where I then secured a three-year research bursary to undertake a second practice-based PhD[24]. I began to develop a creative and critical approach to desire and the erotic body emergent in the Arts Council of Northern Ireland commission I completed for the *Leabhar Mòr na Gaelige / Great Book of Gaelic* project, published in 2002[25].



Leabhar Mòr na Gaeilge / Great Book of Gaelic 2002 **Collection of the Gaelic Arts Agency**

My experimentation in practice (circa 2001-04) involved a 'drag alter ego' (*Queenie*) through whom I could test out a new, less essentialist, less rigidly 'Northern Irish' approach to sex and gender. This concerned a much more playful practice that came to investigate phallic mobility, camp performance conventions, gender stereotypical materiality, *and pleasure*.

In answer to Freud's assertion that women's contribution to culture was via weaving, construction of warp and weft apparently compensating us for female phallic lack[26], *Queenie* knitted her own phallus – detachable, portable, pink and flaccid – in a series of public knitting performances in Derry and London. In a solo exhibition entitled *Anatomical Drag* at the Orchard Gallery, Derry (2001), Queenie created an entirely white – floor, walls and ceiling, large gallery space containing a set of undergarments on a clothes rail, referencing

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[24] I completed a PhD at University of Ulster, Belfast in 1994, on the development of 3D woven glass preforms for fibre-reinforced automotive components with enhanced tensile strength and flexural rigidity (funded by Ford Motors as part of the University's Engineering Composites Research Group.

[25] The *An Leabhar Mòr / Great Book of Gaelic exhibition of twenty-two Irish and Scottish Gaelic poems, translations and commissioned artworks* toured in Ireland, Scotland and the US during 2002-05, at venues including the Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC and the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow. Reviewed in Archipelago: the International Journal of Literature, Arts and Opinion 7:3, Fall 2003, it was also produced as a publication, MacLean, M. (ed.) *An Leabhar Mòr* Canongate Books: Edinburgh, 2002.

anatomy but re-*constructing* – in the materials of culture rather than nature – non-binary genitalia. These garments, to be taken off furthered a concept of sex malleability and gender mobility that was becoming an increasing imperative in this nascent practice.

Anatomical Drag (examples), 2001, fabric, antlers, horns, leather, vintage corsetry. **Private collections / Collection of the artist**

Queenie knits one, purls one / The Virtues medievalmodern Gallery, Marylebone, London,

Of the *Anatomical Drag*, Declan Sheehan wrote:

…the urban as an essential site, as the locus of image projection and inter-relation between inhabitants, played a vital part in Catherine Harper's show at the Orchard Gallery. Appearing as Queenie, an exaggerated cross of domestic goddess and drag queen, the artist had previously stood in Derry's local elections [*on the single issue*

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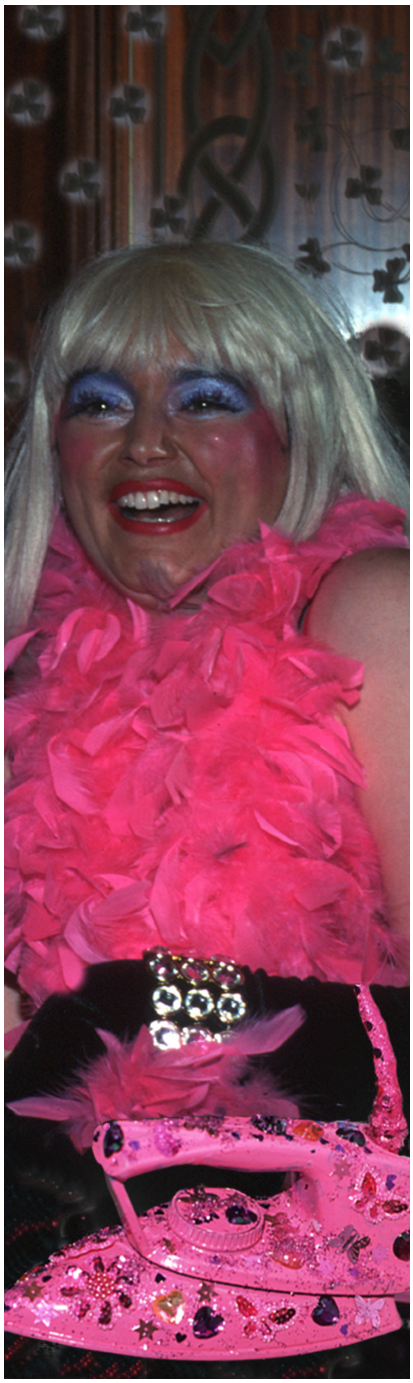
[26] Freud, S. *New introductory lectures on psychoanalysis (Lecture 33: Femininity)* 1933, Standard Edition v22, 136-157.

of Free Ironing, a play on the Republican slogan, Free Ireland]. Her show at the gallery transformed the space into ballroom and fantasy dressing room, specializing in crossing/blending gender roles. But the thrust of the show was Queenie's public appearance and media presence in the urban space: she was featured in newspaper articles and letters, school visits, local television commercials, hospital visits, days spent offering a free and instant ironing service outside Derry's Guildhall and cleaning the city walls [*iconic symbolic and historic location of conflict between Irish and Crown forces*] with a kitchen sponge and domestic cleaning fluid.



This intervention in public space and public life gave the artist's creation of Queenie a remarkably high profile, and opened a debate as to the artistic value of such heightened presence in the public sphere.

The 'drag queen' costume ensured heads turning and lots of conversation, and near universal visibility: but…ultimately what outlives Queenie's physical presence is Queenie as an alluring and charming creation."[27]

While the *Queenie* practice referenced Creed's 'monstrous feminine' and Butler's 'lesbian phallus'[28], *Queenie*'s essence was *jouissance*: pleasure and delight. *Queenie's Ballroom of Possibility* (2001) was entirely decorated with cerise sequined drapes, with revolving glitter-balls creating a never-ending raspberry spiral of reflected glitter.

The music of 'true romance' played, and a single spotlight illuminated a bejewelled ironing board and iron in anticipation of love's ultimate act – the 'good pressing' that Queenie administered in Derry's streets…

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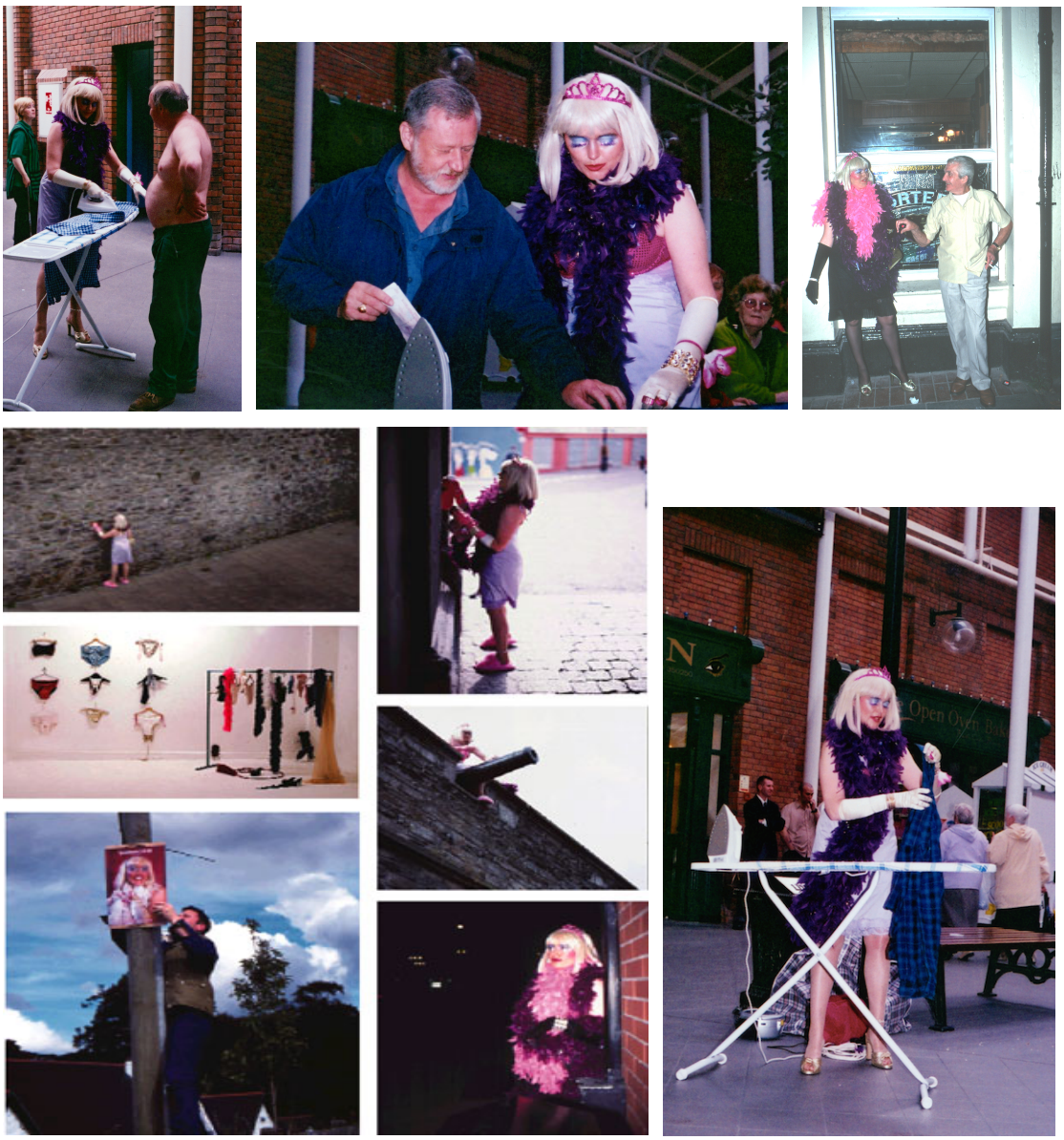
[27] Sheehan, D. *Anatomical Drag* CIRCA 98, Winter 2001, 43

[28] Creed, B, *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* In: Donald, J. (ed.), *Fantasy and the Cinema* London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1989, 63-90.

Butler, J. *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'* New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 57-92.



Queenie Washes the Wall; Queenie Walks the Streets; Queenie's Election – Free Ironing; Anatomical Drag Orchard Gallery and Derry City, 2001

While the *Queenie* and *Anatomical Drag* work was emerging from my doctoral study at Goldsmiths, I read Barry Hugill's sympathetic article on 'hermaphrodite' Linda Roberts[29]. The piece had an immediate impact: just as I had been preoccupied with spaces of secrecy, shame and stigma 'in between' in terms of identity, culture and gender in Northern Ireland, I made a connection with sexed bodies that were just as uncertain and unfixed in their categorisation.

Instead of a second doctoral completion, I wrote a monograph entitled *Intersex* (2007), described in the Taylor & Francis *Journal of Sex Research* as "an exceptional book for an

[29] Hugill, B. *She'd Have Been a God in Ancient Greece...* The Observer 24 May 1998, 7

audience that could desperately use and informed, sympathetic, and understanding voice"[30]. Based on nearly seventy interviews with intersexed individuals, their parents and clinicians, mainly in the UK and US, I cannot fully represent here the detailed work contained in this serious piece of prolonged research. Just as Irish moral and cultural taboos around sex and pregnancy had defined my thinking in the 1980s and 1990s, however, the cultural shame, guilt and panic that uncertainty of anatomical, gonadal, endocrinal and/or genetic sex conjured became the focus of my theoretical and empirical research for *Intersex*, and my practice-based and performance work was replaced by textual practice.

I became Editor-in-Chief for the Taylor & Francis journal *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture* in 2004, and published a four-volume edited work on critical and primary sources of textile scholarship for Bloomsbury (2012)[31]. Arts and Humanities Research Council funding supported development of other writing including *Meditation on Translation and Seduction* for Lesley Millar's *21:21* publication[32], reproduced in Jessica Hemming's *Textile Reader*[33]; a chapter on double dressing lesbian brides for Peter McNeil's *Fashion in Fiction*[34]; an essay for *Textile: Cloth and Culture* titled *I found myself inside her fur*[35]; the co-authored *Revolting Bodies* for *Journal of Lesbian Studies*[36]; a chapter in Moran and O'Brien's *Love Objects*[37]; and a chapter for Lesley Millar and Alice Kettle's *Erotic Cloth*[38].

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[30] Harper, C. *Intersex* Oxford: Berg, 2007.

M.G. Hartlaub *Living Between the Binary: Intersex* Journal of Sex Research 46.5, 2009, 509 - 510.

[31] Harper, C. (ed.) *Textiles: Primary and Critical Sources (four volumes covering History and Curation; Production and Sustainability; Science and Technology; Identity)* Berg: Oxford, 2012 (including editor's 17,000 word introductory essay).

[32] Millar, L. (ed.) *21:21 The textile vision of Reiko Sudo and NUNO* UCCA: Farnham, 2005.

[33] Hemmings, J. (ed.) *The Textile Reader* Berg: Oxford, 2012.

[34] McNeil, P. et al. (eds.) *Fashion in Fiction: Text & Clothing in Literature, Film & Television* Berg: Oxford, 2009.

[35] Harper, C. *I found myself inside her fur* Textile: Journal of Cloth and Culture 2008, 6.3, 300 - 13.

[36] Brown, K., Harper, C., Jenzen, O., Karl, I., O'Donnell, K. *Revolting Bodies, Desiring Lesbians* Journal of Lesbian Studies 2013 17, 3-4, 209-14.

[37] Harper, C. *Sex, Birth, and Nurture Unto Death: Patching Together Quilted Bed Covers* In: Moran, A.,

Section Three
Fabrics of death and desire: land, cloth, body and culture

Father Edward Daly using his white handkerchief as 'cease firing' flag to enable removal of the body of Jackie Duddy during Bloody Sunday, Derry, 1972. Copyright Fulvio Grimaldi, courtesy Museum of Free Derry.

Thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers were shot dead by British Paratroopers in Derry on 30 January 1972[39]. The first fatality, seventeen-year-old old Jackie Duddy, was carried away from the gunfire, with Father Edward Daly using his white handkerchief as a 'cease firing' flag to enable his removal.

The handkerchief was returned to the Duddy family with the rest of their son's belongings, and was kept for some time by them before donation to the Free Derry Museum. The handkerchief itself is embroidered with a neat label saying 'Fr. Daly', stitched by his mother so that the handkerchief would not be lost when it was laundered. It has been washed and ironed carefully, the labour of laundry translating into stoic rituals of mourning and memory.

In the Free Derry Museum is a folded babygro that touched and caressed the body of an infant. It was snatched up to staunch the blood of the seventeen-year-old Michael Kelly, also shot dead by the British Army of Bloody Sunday. All of Michael's clothes from that day were saved, and were to be buried with his mother. The babygro was omitted accidentally from her coffin.

O'Brien, S. (eds.) *Love Objects: Emotion, Design and Material Culture* London: Bloomsbury, 2014

[38] Harper, C. *Present or absent shirts: creation of a lexicon of erotic intimacy and masculine mourning* In: Millar, L, Kettle, A. (eds.) *Erotic Cloth* London, Bloomsbury, 2016.

[39] A fourteenth person died of wounds some months later.

Father Daly's handkerchief (detail) and the blood-stained babygro, both in the Museum of Free Derry. Photographed in situ by Catherine Harper, with permission of the Museum, December 2015.
James Connolly's shirt, 1916. Copyright The Irish Times, the Royal Irish Academy, The National Museum.
Stained dishcloth, detail. Personal collection.

In the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin is the blood-stained shirt worn by James Connolly, leader of the Irish Citizen Army, at Dublin's General Post Office in O'Connell Street during the Easter Rising of 1916. He was not wearing the shirt when he was executed by firing squad while seated in a chair, a serious bullet wound to his ankle.

Irish Republican 'blanket men and women' wrapping their naked bodies in prison blankets, smeared excrement on their cell walls. Those filthy blankets came to be shrouds for those on hunger strike, marked by the fluids of dying bodies, with the intimate body-memories of sorrow and abjection, the special stigmata on a textile substrate, hovering on the border between the living and the corpse [40].

The softness of feathers, applied to hot tar poured on the shaven heads of Northern Irish women accused of relationships with soldiers or policemen in the early years of the Troubles. A savage anointment, a ritual punishment for a perceived sexual transgression. A warning to women that their bodies were not theirs, but policed by the brutal politics of their land and culture.

A hand-knitted dishcloth, tea-stained. A Presbyterian life ebbed away through a catheter, blood dark and thick, seemingly coming in clotted pints. I can see his delicate hands, and how he moved them when flustered. I can see him wringing out the cloth, years after his Mammy's death, wishing his conscience was still there[41].

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[40] Kristeva, J. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

[41] Harper, C. *Textile Memoriam* for a gay relative, Belfast, 2015.

The *Healing Through Remembering* project audited over four thousand material, social and political cultural artifacts of the Troubles: paramilitary berets, balaclavas and camouflage garments; bullet-proof vests and flak jackets; the Kevlar bomb disposal suits used by Police and Army personnel; leather and cloth restraint harness used by Prison Officers to bind the arms of prisoners[42]. Such selected items carry a patina of their use, there are stains that will not go, that linger as indexes of moments of existence, proof of happenings, evidence of desire or grief, memories traced on cloths[43]. Cloths fade, remembrance dims, but persistent stains linger as physical or psychic evidence of the corporeal, imprinting the sensations of smell, touch, sorrow and mortality into fabric's history, and resisting – like prolonged death throes or the never-ending-ness of a death-rattle – the body's ultimate erasure [44].

John Hume, Nobel Laureate, and principal architect of the Northern Irish peace process, reported his father as having said:

> You can't eat a flag…real politics is about the living standards, about social and economic development. It's not about waving flags at one another[45].

In Ireland *and* Northern Ireland, the fabric of the land and its culture is marked by the leakage of persistent sores and raw wounds borne by the unhealed messy flesh of the national body[46]. Peter Stallybrass notes that cloth "receives us: receives our smells, our sweat, our shape even"[47], and the role of clothing in illuminating social, cultural, material and gendered constructions of identity and in making meaning is clear.

With this in mind, and with the current support of a Janet Arnold Award (Society of Antiquaries of London) and a Marc Fitch Fund Award, I have embarked on a new examination of the politically charged, stained and abject cloths of my land and culture that are overlooked by the dominant discourses of Irish textile culture, in relation to the

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[42] Brown, K. *Artefacts Audit - A Report On The Material Culture Of The Conflict In And About Northern Ireland* Belfast: Healing Through Remembering, 2008.

[43] von Busch, O. *TEXTILE PUNCTUM - embroidery of memory* Selfpassage, 2005, 5.

[44] Barthes, R. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* London: Vintage, 1979, 26-27.

[45] Griehsel, M. *Interview with John Hume* 2006 http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1998/hume-interview-transcript.html (accessed November 2015).

[46] Barnett, P. *Stain* In: Pajaczkowska, C., Ward, I. (eds.) *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture* New York: Routledge, 2008, 203-215.

[47] Stallybrass, P. *Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things* In: Ben-Amos, D., Weissberg, L. *Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999, 28.

bodies that are swaddled, shrouded, stifled, strangled and sheltered by them.

As a *weaver* by trade and training, a *seamstress* and *laundress* by design, an *artist* in text and textiles by sensibility, I have spun a yarn, tangled a web, and constructed a text(ile) of the inter-weave of narrative, materiality and identity that I define as my intellectual and practice obsessions. My visual, performance and textual work explores 'the places in-between' in Irish and Northern Irish gender and identity, in intersex and 'anatomical drag', and in fabrics of death and desire. In this extended essay, each work I have shown and each word I have spoken is chosen from over twenty-five years of a creative and professional practice concerned with making sense of the complexities, conundrums, challenges and contradictions of *my* land, *my* cloth, *my* body and *my* culture.

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